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INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0337
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7162
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4967
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 1571
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 002052

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/12/2016
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ARMY SHELLS HIT VAKARAI IDPS,
GOVERNMENT CLAIMS LTTE USING HUMAN SHIELDS

REF: A. COLOMBO 1973

1B. COLOMBO 1947 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: DCM James R. Moore, for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) Summary: In a December 11 press release, the International Committee for the Red Cross confirmed the Sri Lankan Army (SLA) shelling December 8-11 killed up to 27 civilians in LTTE-controlled Vakarai and injured 30. About 35,000 civilians remain trapped in Vakarai where the LTTE and GSL security forces have been engaged in battle since early November. While the GSL claims the LTTE is using civilians as human shields, it is likely that at least some of the civilians - all of them Tamils, many of whom are internally displaced persons from July's battle in Sampur - may support the LTTE, and therefore do not want to leave. On December 7, the LTTE shelled a Sinhalese village near Trincomalee, Kallar, killing three. An attempt by government security forces to clear Vakarai of LTTE cadres would almost certainly result in an unacceptable number of civilian casualties, as well as doom the peace process. End Summary.

Civilian Populations Threatened

12. (C) Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told Pol FSN that LTTE shelling from the Vakarai area on December 7 landed in the predominantly Sinhalese villages of Kallar, Serunuwara and Mahindapura (Trincomalee district), killing six civilians, including a young boy, and injuring 10 school children. He accused the LTTE of trying to provoke the SLA to return fire into areas where the LTTE is allegedly using human shields.

13. (C) On December 8, artillery from the Mahindapura SLA camp fell near the Vammivedduvan and Palchenai IDP camps in Vakarai, according to the TRO, who claimed the shelling killed at least 27 civilians and wounded 67. On December 10, more than 30 shells landed near Vakarai hospital where TRO coordinator told Pol FSN that 7,000 civilians had gathered. The TRO claimed six IDP camps received direct hits and sent photos of the dead and injured to the diplomatic community and international agencies.

International Agencies Concerned

14. (C) The Ministry of Defense initially denied the Red Cross

(ICRC) access to Vakarai, citing security concerns. On December 11, the ICRC entered Vakarai and evacuated 30 injured persons, including seven children, by boat to Valachchenai in government-controlled Batticaloa. In a press statement, ICRC head of sub-delegation Martin de Boer stated: "Many difficulties had to be overcome to organize this evacuation. More injured civilians are waiting to be evacuated."

15. (C) The United Nations Office of the Resident Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs (UNORCHA) stated December 11: "The UN is deeply concerned about indiscriminate shelling of civilian residential areas, leading to death, injuries, and evacuation of communities... The civilian population must be granted full and unhindered freedom of movement, away from military operations."

Monitors Can't Verify

16. (C) A December 12 statement by the SLMM condemned the LTTE for restricting the movement of civilians in Vakarai and criticized the GSL for restricting monitors' access to areas of engagement in the region. The Colombo staff of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) told Pol chief that they had reliable reports that nine civilians had died (including 8 children) and 50 were injured in the December 10-11 shelling. At least 25 were in need of medical evacuation. (The ICRC evacuated the most critical on December 11.) As of December 11, most of the IDPs had moved from the northern part of Vakarai (Katriaveli) and are now staying in the vicinity of the hospital.

17. (C) The 23rd Division headquarters has called SLMM

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(protect) on several occasions to say they are not shelling civilians, but that LTTE had established artillery positions in close proximity to three schools. The SLMM was asked to tell the LTTE not to use civilians as shields. LTTE denies such deployment. The SLA commander told the SLMM on the evening of December 10 that at least 15 soldiers had been killed and at least 42 injured by LTTE shelling. The commander reiterated that the army is not shelling civilians and said that LTTE is trying to discredit the SLA by these false allegations. The December 12 government-owned Daily News headlined allegations that the LTTE is using IDPs as human shields by refusing to let them leave the Vakarai area.

18. (C) Comment: We consider it highly unlikely that government security forces would deliberately target civilians when it knows the international community is watching the situation in Vakarai so closely. However, it is also true that government actions in the Vakarai area appear to go well beyond purely defensive activities. It is not clear whether the government intends to drive the LTTE out of its last foothold on the eastern coast in the near term. The level of civilian casualties this would entail would probably be unacceptable to the government, as well as to the international community. The military's minimum goal is probably to keep the LTTE off-balance and prevent it from reinforcing its position in Vakarai in order to build up a stronghold to replace the one lost in Sampur in August. In any case, an ongoing SLA operation to clear Vakarai of the LTTE would probably doom what is left of the peace process. We will therefore continue to urge both military and political authorities to exercise greater restraint in the eastern theater.

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